

## Helsinki Biennial 2023 reached four of its five goals

The 2023 Helsinki Biennial, organised for the second time by HAM Helsinki Art Museum, successfully achieved the majority of its goals. While it fell short of the anticipated number of visitors, the positive feedback from international media and attendees has been uplifting. The biennial was organised on Vallisaari Island, at HAM Helsinki Art Museum, and in various places around Helsinki from 11 June to 22 October 2023.

Helsinki Biennial 2023 reached four of its five goals. Helsinki's reputation as an attractive and high-quality art and cultural city increased, the event reached new audiences, it was sustainably organised, and establishing the event in Helsinki and as part of HAM's operations progressed. The goal of 300,000 visitors was not reached.

"This time, we reached a third of our ambitious target number of visitors. There are several causes for it, the most significant being the ferry ticket's increased price, a rainy summer, and the content larger audiences might have felt difficult to relate to. However, the visitor feedback indicated that the biennial made an impression, especially on people visiting Vallisaari for the first time. International media and professionals gave mainly positive feedback, both on the island's circumstances and the biennial's artistic content," said **Arja Miller**, director of Helsinki Biennial and HAM.

In 2023, Helsinki Biennial reached 112,00 visitors, of which 55,900 visited Vallisaari Island and 56,100 explored the works on the mainland or online. Of the visitors, more than 10,000 explored the biennial during the free entry days. Free ferry tickets to Vallisaari were sponsored by the City of Helsinki in June and July and by S Group in August.

A great number of Helsinki's fifth-graders visited Helsinki Biennial as part of Helsinki's Culture Path activities. Pupils were offered an equal opportunity to experience art in a unique destination. More than 1,200 pupils from Helsinki visited Vallisaari. To support the visit, the biennial provided school groups free online learning materials intended for children in grades 4–6. Schoolchildren's ferry tickets were supported by Metsähallitus and the ferry operator FRS Finland.

Helsinki Biennial 2023 featured works from 29 international artists and collectives. The biennial was available to audiences on Vallisaari, at HAM Helsinki Art Museum, Helsinki Central Library Oodi, and Cultural Centre Stoa as well as on the bicycle and pedestrian path Baana and the Lyypekinlaituri pier. Additionally, six artworks were featured online. The biennial was curated by **Joasia Krysa**, who works at the intersection of contemporary art and technology.

"It is the nature of biennials that they are different from each other. Helsinki Biennial 2021 presented 41 artists. This edition had fewer artists and artworks. Curator Joasia Krysa wanted to provide an opportunity to explore the works in peace and create a subtle dialogue with the environment," Arja Miller said.

### International media success and impressive professional programme

The Finnish media had a critical attitude towards Helsinki Biennial, while international media praised the combination of art and nature experienced on Vallisaari. More than 90 international press visits were made to the event, and so far, 112 pieces of international media coverage of the event have been recorded. The event received visibility in publications such as *Forbes*, *Wallpaper*, *The Telegraph*, *Euronews*, and *Svenska Dagsbladet*.

“Our international communications reached news media globally, and numerous international critics and cultural journalists wrote about Helsinki Biennial. Several art publications covered the biennial, and the event strengthened its position on the field’s event calendar. The total coverage of the international content exceeded 231 million viewers. That, if anything, increases curiosity for the 2025 biennial,” Arja Miller said.

Helsinki Biennial managed to develop its professional programme. Approximately 400 Finnish and international visual art professionals explored the biennial during the preview days. Professionals were also interested in other biennial-related events, such as the two-day gatherings organised by the Museum of Impossible Forms at the cultural centres Stoa and Caisa.

## New audiences on mainland and online

One of the Helsinki Biennial 2023’s goals was to reach new audiences. Various locations were added around Helsinki to make the biennial present on the mainland and accessible without a ferry. Located on the bicycle and pedestrian path Baana, the temporary public artwork by the **Zheng Mahler** collective will remain temporarily on display at least until spring 2024.

The biennial included six online artworks that garnered a total of 6 500 views during the event. Combining HAM’s art collection and machine learning, Korean **Yehwan Song**’s AI-based artwork *Newly Formed* will be available on the Helsinki Biennial website until the end of 2025. The work provides a unique opportunity to interact with the City of Helsinki’s art collection processed by AI.

HAM has acquired two biennial works in its art collection: *Hypoxia* by Lithuanian artist **Emilija Škarnulytė** and *Songs to Earth, Songs to Seeds* by Iranian-Finnish artist **Sepideh Rahaa**.

## Heading into 2025 with the large audiences in mind

At HAM, the focus has already turned towards the 2025 biennial. The analysis of the recently ended event continues with a review of the impact and visitor research results, for example. The close cooperation with Metsähallitus, responsible for ferry service tendering and managing Vallisaari, will continue, and HAM will do its best to check the pricing of transportation connections to Vallisaari.

“We will organise the next biennial with even more devotion and with the large audiences in mind. At the same time, our aim is to make Helsinki Biennial one of the most well-known international art biennials. The level of ambition is high,” Arja Miller said emphatically.

**Blanca de la Torre** and **Kati Kivinen** have been announced as head curators of Helsinki Biennial 2025. Even though official goals have not yet been decided, the biennial, organised for the third time in 2025, has been committed from the beginning to produce art in a sustainable manner.

### *Helsinki Biennial*

*Helsinki Biennial, held every two years, is an international contemporary art event organised for the second time in summer 2023. The biennial is a joint project for the City of Helsinki and part of the Helsinki City Strategy 2021–2025. The biennial is produced by HAM Helsinki Art Museum.*

*The main partners of the 2023 Helsinki Biennial are Metsähallitus, S Group, and Clear Channel. It is also supported by Saastamoinen Foundation. Helsinki Biennial 2023 received a state grant from the Finnish Heritage Agency.*